

# BOOK REVIEW

**Kenneth King and Meera Venkatachalam (eds). *India's Development Diplomacy and Soft Power in Africa*.** Oxford: James Currey, 2021. 221 pp. Index. \$36.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1847012746.

This edited collection by Kenneth King and Meera Venkatachalam offers a fresh and well-researched exploration of India's relations with African countries. The essays in *India's Development Diplomacy and Soft Power in Africa* expand our horizon well beyond Bandung, Afro-Asian solidarity, and critiques of non-alignment idealism by illuminating multifaceted African-Indian relationships—economic, cultural, religious, and social—especially since the 1970s. In focusing on recent foreign relations, European colonization, which is so often cited as a shared basis of African-Indian partnerships, fades into the background as a “rhetorical” discourse (188). Readers can better see changing power relations in a multipolar world over the last two decades, including the meaning of Africa-Asia beyond China and China's competition with the West.

The book's nine chapters, based on field research conducted in Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, and Tanzania, offer specific examples that help the volume escape India-centricity and mostly avoid generalizations about Africa. Instead, the readers gain perspectives on multipolar and multiform diplomatic and private-industry negotiations operating in the Global South. The book balances between disciplines and regional expertise, including anthropology, history, and political science, with contributions from scholars with area studies training in Africa and India. Readers will appreciate the attention to intergovernmental development work and person-to-person interactions through international study, film, and e-networks.

The introduction by King and Venkatachalam begins with a brief history of the approaches by successive Indian governments to relations with the African continent. From Nehru's anticolonial stance through India's economic liberalization in the 1990s to Modi's era, these approaches shifted from political solidarity and technical development to diversified governmental and private sector investments in manufacturing, healthcare, agriculture, and information technology. Using Joseph Nye's conceptualization of

soft power, the authors argue that India seeks influence through relations with and rhetoric of Africa to achieve self-interested outcomes. Indian soft power in Africa has involved different kinds of aid, Indian diaspora-managed entrepreneurialism, and cultural goods that can be commercialized—such as Ayurveda traditional medicine, Bollywood, and cloth. These enterprises serve the self-image of Indians at home, in the diaspora, and on the world stage. While acknowledging the dearth of research on African perspectives of India, the indirect message here is that Africans may view relations with Indians in pragmatic and situationally-specific ways, while Indians use Africans in constructing grand ideological narratives while also seeking markets for their products.

Shangwe makes this point in Chapter One, focusing on the wider East African region as an important “barometer of New Delhi’s soft power in the continent” (37). He argues that despite the deep historicity of Indian Ocean relations, the past is not all positive and is constantly debated, as Indians face present-day competition with Chinese, American, and Middle Eastern players in East Africa. African responses to Indian models of development and the Indian diaspora’s commercial ventures have forced Indians to compromise and change.

In Chapter Two, Sarkar and Panda adopt an inter-Asian perspective by examining India-Japan alliances in relations with Africa as a strategy to check China’s power. India-Japan business overtures have expanded since the COVID-19 pandemic, which damaged China’s global stature. While this viewpoint is useful, the essay might have mentioned pre-pandemic Africa-China tensions that were rising on account of labor abuses and other problems.

The next two chapters detail how India’s changing politics and bid for global enrichment have produced tensions with Africans. In Chapter Three, Venkatachalam charts India’s changing rhetoric from solidarity with Africa to hierarchy over Africa. She shows how Indian leaders and their supporters have a new understanding of global power and reinvent Hinduism as a civilizing mission in the vein of European Christian evangelism (64). In Chapter Four, Vittorini demonstrates through episodes of protest against Gandhi statues in South Africa and Ghana that Indians themselves are struggling over their history and its uses in the “symbolic landscape” of African-Indian relations (92). Africans contend with history as Indians’ presence in their countries grows.

The next several chapters highlight the intricate negotiations taking place in different spheres. In Chapter Five, King discusses public and private schemes for expanding Africans’ access to higher education in India. Thousands of African students from throughout the continent have received training through Indian outlets (in-person and virtual) in various fields, but crises brought on by the COVID pandemic and stalled implementation have created doubts that India can fulfill its promises. The Pan-African E Network, launched in New Delhi in 2009 to expand telemedicine and tele-education, suffered from some of the same setbacks, as Duclos discusses in

Chapter Six. In the area of health diplomacy, Roychoudhry and Mawdsley focus on India's efforts to provide COVID aid in Africa, which seem to be inspired by geopolitical calculations to counter China more than goodwill (144). India's own COVID failures exposed the vulnerability of its poorest citizens and challenged its status as a health leader.

Chapter Eight highlights a different precarity. Mgumia and Chachage trace adaptations in business ventures undertaken by African and Indian-origin Tanzanians amid racial tensions over persistent inequalities favoring the latter. The authors demonstrate that Tanzanians continue to debate interracial cooperation in public media and economic reforms. McCann analyzes a similar balancing act in Chapter Nine, on African students in India, whose numbers have fluctuated owing to "continued negative African perceptions..." and other factors (179).

More of these perspectives would have enriched the book, but this slim affordable volume achieves what edited books often do not—consistent high quality and connective arguments across chapters that make important contributions to a growing field.

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